

Christian Sampson

Tempus volat, hora fugit

Written by Senior Curator of Contemporary Art, Katherine Pill



Before writing the *Aeneid*, the Roman poet Virgil (71 BCE- 20 CE) wrote *Georgics* (29 BCE), a poem in four books that addressed agricultural themes, from animal husbandry to the social patterns of bees. Most famously, to contemporary audiences, perhaps, was his introduction of the concept of the fleetingness of time. In Book 3 he wrote "*fugit irreparable tempus*," which translates to "it escapes, irretrievable time." Over centuries this phrase has become popularized as "*tempus fugit*," which is typically translated to "time flies" in English, and is related to the phrase "*carpe diem*," or "seize the day." Artist Christian Sampson (American, b. 1974) has chosen a more nuanced Latin phrase for his four-part installation, "*tempus volat, hora fugit*," which more specifically translates to "time flies, hours flee." That is, time in a larger sense goes quickly, yes, but the hours of the day seem to run away. What more fitting metaphor for our media-saturated times, when attention spans for people of all ages appear to be dwindling, and acts of slowing down become fewer and far between.

Sampson is a multidisciplinary artist with a background in painting; a collector's knack for voracious research and creative sourcing; and a keen interest in the durational capacities of natural light as an artistic medium. Begun in March 2023 on the occasion of the vernal equinox, Sampson's four-part, iterative installation is a study of color and time, and is inspired by the

astronomical calendar. Working site-specifically with multiple visits to the Mary Alice McClendon Conservatory, Sampson has closely, excitedly, observed the sun's movement throughout the light-filled space, and has created something of a performance, one that encourages visitors to take stock of their place within the larger world.

Each morning, as the sun rises along the bay, light begins to flood the gridded panes of glass that frame the museum's east Bayfront Drive entrance. Rectangles of light in various sizes are projected onto the Conservatory's stone floor, reaching almost to the catwalk before becoming sharper, smaller, and receding back towards the wall of glass. At about noon, lines of light are projected directly from above, through the Conservatory's partially-filtered skylights; and in the late afternoon, light is cast from the west side of the museum onto the floor in front of the Beach Drive entrance. Although this light show has occurred since the building of the Hazel Hough Wing in 2008 by architect Yann Weymouth (American, b. 1941), Sampson's addition of colored filters on select panes of glass has allowed for a truly dramatic immersive experience.

March 20, 2023 was the vernal equinox. Sampson decided to emphasize a sense of balance and symmetry with his first installation, referencing the fact that the equinoxes mark the times of year when across the world the length of daylight is just about equal to the length of night (the word translates from Latin to "equal night"). Sampson focused on the east wall of gridded windows, taking into account views from the catwalk and from various points of the Conservatory. The grid is a common form in Minimalist sculpture, evoking harmony, repetition, and geometric order. Sampson has softened the grid, taking a painterly approach to color and composition, while also experimenting with naturally-occurring interactions with the water and vegetation on the other side of the glass wall. For Sampson, the grid evokes not just Minimalist structure, but also the idea of film stills. Although the artist is deeply influenced by the phenomenological concepts of artists of California's Light and Space movement of the 1960s, he is equally entranced by the history of the moving image; he thinks of his works in cinematic terms as much as he does in conceptual ones. The colored shapes, created by the natural projection of sunlight, are in constant motion, and one never knows when a tree branch moved by the wind or a cloud suddenly rolling in will change the artwork's composition.

For the summer solstice on June 23, 2023, Sampson chose to further embellish the east wall, as well as the west and moved to the highest reaches of the Conservatory. In the Northern Hemisphere, the summer solstice represents the Earth's maximum tilt towards the sun, resulting in the longest day of the year as the sun reaches its highest altitude in relation to the Earth. Sampson therefore took more of a maximalist approach, adding new colors to the east wall, including light and dark greys that hint at summer storms, and focusing also on the vestibule doors at both the Conservatory's east and west entrances. The vestibules reflect light more than project it, creating complex illusions and color interactions that help to create an overall immersive feeling to the installation; there is a geometric flooding of colored light from multiple angles.

Sampson has long been fascinated by the effects of light on varied materials. It is an interest that began when he worked at the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota, where one of

his primary tasks was to maintain light levels within the galleries. He could witness firsthand the effects of different light temperatures on oil paintings, providing a clear understanding of relational color, and the fact that color is far from a static perception. Also, while in Sarasota, as a student at Ringling College, Sampson began early experiments with colored discs and sun projections. He took 10-inch colored Plexiglas discs to Siesta Key, and delicately placed two in the sand, about eight inches apart. The sun sent cylindrical projections of blue and green across the sand, and in many ways this installation, documented with 8 x 10 photographs, stands as a precursor to the work Sampson is doing today, which is the largest scale of his career.



Indeed, for the autumn equinox on September 23, 2023, Sampson placed colored discs throughout the ceiling windows of the Conservatory. At midday, the sun hits the discs from overhead and they are projected onto the north walls of the Conservatory, in a vertical, almost clock-like, line. Finally, for the Winter Solstice on December 21, 2023, Sampson created Minimalist cubes that sit on the east vestibule of the Conservatory, and can be viewed from the catwalk.

Another artist who works at Sampson's scale is Spencer Finch (American, b. 1962), who has similarly used color film on windows to encourage reflection upon the natural phenomena that surrounds us. For an installation at New York's High Line, for instance, Finch spent a day photographing the Hudson River from a tugboat, taking photos every minute. He used this digital documentation to create custom-printed films that were installed over panes of glass in a former above-ground train tunnel, showing just how much the color of water changes second by second; it is impossible to truly pin down.

Sampson works on a broader conceptual scale; in this case, that of the astronomical calendar. With each iterative installation, Sampson comments on the very rotation of the Earth on its axis,

and our relation to the sun and place in the solar system. Measuring time is a construct that has been perfected over the course of Millenia, taking a multitude of forms across the world. Today, time is measured largely through the Gregorian calendar, established in 1582. It is one way that humankind has sought to bring predictable order to the natural world, and *Tempus volat, hora fugit*, truly serves as a reminder of this construct, and of the sense of magnitude that it helps corral.

Sampson speaks often of the sublime, and it is difficult not to feel a sense of awe as one contemplates the sun's path, the earth's orbit, and our tiny place within the solar system and time. In his writings on the sublime, Immanuel Kant (German, 1724-1804) uses a mathematical approach, with a focus on the concept of infinity. He wrote that "to be able even to think the infinite as a whole indicates a mental power that surpasses any standard of sense." That is, we can understand infinity or true magnitude as a concept but can never understand infinity in its entirety. For Kant, "true sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the judging person, not in the natural object." He did not believe a raging sea or a vast mountain range was inherently spiritually overwhelming. Instead, the sublime was found within the mind of one contemplating an impossible-to-experience concept.

More recently, and in contrast to Kant, psychologist Dacher Keltner, has written *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life*. He says, "Awe is the feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends your understanding of the world." He argues that awe can and should be found in daily life, and that it leads to a multitude of physical and mental health benefits. Since the first installation, the museum has supported unique interactions with *Tempus volat, hora fugit*, hosting Thursday yoga sessions that take full advantage of the color's early morning movements.

Tempus volat, hora fugit is, first and foremost, an immersive exercise in color and form that is clearly constructed by an artist whose background is in painting. It is also, however, an exercise in confronting and contemplating the vastness of the universe, and our place within it. Visitors are invited to slow down, to open up to new ways of experiencing artistic practice, and to dare to consider the sublime vastness of time.